

The Congressman on his legislative agenda and the bailout

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What's the first thing on your to-do list when Congress goes back into session with the new members and a new White House?

The first order of business in Washington will be to address the economy. Millions of Americans are worried that they're going to lose their jobs, lose their health insurance, lose their homes, lose their livelihood.

We must cooperate in a bipartisan manner to bolster our economy, and I'm eager to get to work with our new president.

There are a variety of projects for the New Year. One specific project I hope to see progress on is the creation of a joint VA/DOD clinic for our veterans and service members. I will continue to work with local officials on a variety of local projects, from transportation to housing to agriculture.

Legislatively speaking, I'll be introducing my oceans bill immediately: the Oceans Conservation, Education, and National Strategy for the 21st Century Act.

I've written about this bill in the past. Known as Oceans-21, this legislation would be the first major ocean governance bill in more than 30 years. It would fundamentally re-work how we deal with the ocean.

Anyone who works in an ocean-related industry knows that our national policy is muddled. There are six federal departments and dozens of agencies that share control of the ocean, forced to cope with more than 140 laws, many that overlap and conflict.

One of the primary goals of Oceans-21 is to create a national ocean policy that focuses on regional input and uses ecosystem-based models of governance. Locals, who know their own waters best, must be the ones making decisions.

Oceans-21 will create national and regional ocean advisory committees that will bring a range of stakeholders together to advise lawmakers. The bill would also create an ocean advisor in the president's Cabinet. We need to change how we address the ocean throughout all layers of government.

Support for the bill isn't isolated to ocean groups. A task force of national environmental organizations, including the Sierra Club and the National Audubon Society, recently sent a report to President-elect Obama that included a broad series of environmental recommendations.

In the report, titled "Transition to Green," the task force called on Obama to "support Oceans-21 or similar legislative action to establish a national ocean policy to protect, maintain and restore marine ecosystem health and resilience."

Washington gave us the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act, two vital laws that keep us safe. It's time we pass a "Clean Ocean Act"-Oceans-21.

The Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 has seemingly opened a floodgate of congressional spending on the economy. Automakers are now clamoring for similar treatment to what banks and investment firms received. Variety recently ran a headline wondering if the national television networks need a bailout. The total federal investment is in the trillions. How much can Congress realistically do to help the economy? Have the steps it has taken thus far made sense?

I disagree with the premise of the question. The financial rescue plan has not "opened a floodgate of Congressional spending." Rather, Congress was forced to act to counter an emergency that has the potential to hurt millions of families.

The rescue plan approved in October was necessary to keep our financial system from failing. If banks go under, loans for homes, cars, even college tuition would be impossible to secure. This was not a Wall Street bailout, it was a loan to the financial industry to make sure Americans can get money when they desperately need it.

The president, through Treasury Secretary Paulson, has used less than half of the allocated funds; the rest will remain untouched until President-elect Obama enters the White House. Rep. Barney Frank, chairman of the House Financial Services Committee, recently said, "The good news is that the Secretary does not plan to spend the second \$350 billion that has been voted and will leave that to the Obama administration."

The process has not been perfect, with a recent Government Accountability Office report criticizing the Treasury Department for lack of transparency and accountability. But Congress is working to fix those problems and provide the necessary oversight.

Talk of a rescue plan for the American auto industry is an entirely different animal. The only thing the two rescue plans have in common is a general lack of explanation for their necessity.

A study by the Center for Automotive Research, a Michigan nonprofit, shows that an auto industry collapse would lead to a loss of 3 million jobs, and not just from auto companies. We would see jobs lost at auto dealers, suppliers and many other businesses across the nation. The pain would not be isolated to Detroit.

The auto industry is responsible for about 4 percent of our GDP and 10 percent of our industrial production base. If a single major auto company were to fail, it would be a major blow to our economy and our pocketbooks. On top of the revenue lost, the federal government would be saddled with enormous pension and health care liabilities. The burden would further strain our already crippled economy.

Just as with the financial rescue plan, Congress is not looking to prop up big business. The goal is to make sure that a crisis does not lead to millions of Americans out of work and scraping to survive.

